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ABSTRACT

This issue of the Australian Early Childhood Association Research in Practice Series focuses on the ethical dilemmas encountered by those working in early childhood services in Australia. The booklet details some common ethical dilemmas and contains the text of the AECA Code of Ethics. The booklet includes background information on the code, including definitions of key words and phrases, and explains the basis for a code of ethics. The booklet further reminds early childhood professionals of what is important in working with young children and their families, with colleagues, in the community, and within the profession. The booklet also discusses the following questions concerning the code: (1) Why do we need one? (2) Who benefits from having a code? (3) How was it developed? (4) How is the code relevant to early childhood practitioners? (5) To whom does the code apply? (6) How does a code of ethics differ from a policy statement, regulations, or other legal obligations? (7) How will it be enforced? and (8) Is it fixed for all time? The booklet concludes that familiarity and use of the AECA Code of Ethics by all early childhood professionals will benefit the profession and the children who are the focus of the work of the profession. (KB)

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AECA... Voice for Young Children

Anne Stonehouse

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REVISED EDITION

Invitation to Authors

The AECA Research in Practice Series is published four times each year by the Australian Early Childhood Association.

The series aims to provide practical, easy to read, up-to-date information and support to a growing national readership of early childhood workers. The books bring together the best information available on wide ranging topics and are an ideal resource for children's services workers and others interested in the care and education of young children. Books produced in previous years have now become standard texts in many early childhood courses.

The AECA Publications Committee invites contributions on all aspects of the education and care of young children. Given the multi-disciplinary nature of the field, contributions from all disciplines concerned with young children and their families are welcome.

All Research in Practice Series manuscripts are required to undergo a blind review by readers experienced in the field and will not necessarily be published. The style of the Research in Practice books must be simple and informative. Jargon and the presumption of prior knowledge should be avoided. Guidelines for contributors are available on request from the Publications Section.

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code of ethics at work

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Anne Stonehouse is currently Associate Professor of Early Childhood, Monash University and Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Research and Professional Development. Prior to coming to Monash in 1996, she was at the Northern Territory University for 11 years. She was National President of the Australian Early Childhood Association from 1989–1992 and convened the National Working Party that developed the AECA Code of Ethics. Her publications are many. Recent ones include *How Does It Feel? A Parent's Perspective on Child Care*, *Trusting Toddlers*, *Not Just Nice Ladies*, *Ourselves in Their Shoes*, and *Opening the Doors: Child Care in a Multicultural Society*, as well as many articles. Her most recent book is co-authored with Jim Greenman, and is titled *Prime Times: A Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs*. The Australian version of this book was published in 1997. She has given numerous conference addresses, talks, workshops and in-service training sessions for early childhood professionals over the years. Recently Anne was the consultant for the Quality Assurance Project for the National Family Day Care Council, out of which came the report *It's Sort of Like Being at Home: Values and Elements of Quality in Family Day Care*.

WHAT CAN A CODE ACHIEVE?

In the time that the Code has been in place, it has assisted the profession in many ways. However, its full potential impact is yet to be achieved. Used optimally, the Code can be the following:

1. A guide to the beliefs and values of the early childhood profession and what constitutes professional behaviour.
2. When it is used in professional development activities, a basis for early childhood professionals to support each other, to explore solutions to complex questions, to be reassured that the questions are indeed complex—in other words, to confirm that there are very few easy answers in professional early childhood practice. This should boost morale and strengthen commitment.
3. A tool to provoke discussion about many important topics related to good early childhood practice, for example, discipline, parent-staff relationships, responding to individual needs, incorporating diversity, and teamwork, to name a few.
4. A statement about what we all have in common, whatever setting we work in, whatever age children we work with, whether or not we work directly with children or if we are policy-makers, lecturers, administrators, advisory staff. The Code should unite us as a profession.
5. A statement for those thinking of entering the profession or studying to be in the profession about the dimensions of being a contemporary early childhood professional. It is no longer appropriate for people entering the profession to be motivated solely by a desire to work mainly alone with a group of young children. The Code is a powerful statement about the multifaceted role of the early childhood professional, her or his responsibilities to parents, colleagues, the community, and the profession, as well as to children. Considerable attention should be given to the Code in courses that prepare early childhood professionals.
6. A strong statement to parents and the general community about what the profession stands for, its complexity, and the basis for practice.
7. A means of raising status, in as much as having a code of ethics is one of the requirements usually listed for being a professional.
8. A powerful tool for advocacy.
9. A reference point for discussion about shared values.

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OUR code of ethics at work

Everyone who works in the early childhood or children's services profession, regardless of the type of service or their particular role, faces difficult situations which have a moral or ethical dimension. This includes teachers and other practitioners, students training to work with children, lecturers, providers of program support, policy makers, and administrators. These are situations in which the best or 'right' thing to do is not obvious, and where diverse views exist about the wisest course of action. These situations are called ethical dilemmas, and their resolution usually involves some kind of compromise.

Ethical dilemmas are: situations in which the best or 'right' thing to do is not obvious, and where diverse views exist about the wisest course of action

Some common ethical dilemmas

- You are aware that a fellow student, a single parent of three young children, is borrowing another student's work and submitting it as her own. She is close to completing her course and being in a position to get a job. Do you say anything to anyone about it?
- You are on a field placement in a child care centre. When you arrive one morning, three staff have phoned in at the last minute to say they are sick, and two new children who are attending their first day at the centre are distressed. The director says she knows it is against course policy to allow students to be alone with a group of children, but in this case she wonders if you would be willing to be with the five two-year-olds, including the two new

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The Code is a statement of what we believe is important, and can be used to educate the community

children, for an hour until the relief staff arrive. Otherwise these young children will have to be added to the four-year-old group. What do you do?

- You are aware that another family day carer in your scheme regularly has more children in her care than is allowed, as she takes in her neighbour's children on an emergency basis when the neighbour's medical condition requires her to go to hospital at short notice. The children seem happy and the carer appears to cope well. Do you report her?
- As a Year 1 teacher, you are opposed to standardised testing of young children. However, your school is likely to benefit from such testing, as it is in an affluent community. Much-needed extra funds will be given to schools that perform well. Do you oppose such testing or go along with it?
- The policy is that extensions to deadlines for assignments are not granted unless the request is made at least two days in advance. A student comes to you in the afternoon of the day the assignments are due and says that her child has been ill for a week, and that she will not be able to hand the assignment in until tomorrow. Her work is borderline and a reduction in marks for this assignment may tip the balance and give her a 'fail'. Do you grant the extension?
- Two-and-a-half-year-old Maria, who has been coming to the centre for more than a year, bit three children during the day. She bit a child yesterday. Her father has seemed very tense and sharp with Maria lately. Do you say anything to him when he picks her up at the end of the day? What do you say if he asks how her day was?
- As an adviser, you are working hard to build a good relationship with a new centre. Two parents who use the centre ring you up to report practices that are not acceptable, although technically they do not breach licensing regulations. What do you do with the information?
- As a policy maker with a state government, you are faced with the challenge of promoting a change in early childhood services policy that you do not

agree with because it will lower quality, but it is likely to win votes in the upcoming election. What do you do?

- Another group leader in your centre confides in you that she has had a drug problem for some time, but that she is now getting it under control. She asks you not to tell anyone. What do you do with the information?
- A parent group in your preschool is very active in the local hunting club. They offer to raise money for the preschool with a raffle at the launch of the duck shooting season. You are opposed to any exposure of children to guns. Do you accept the offer?
- Your principal asks you to implement a strict behaviour modification program in your classroom. You have some fundamental disagreements with this program. How do you respond?
- A child in your preschool is extremely disruptive. This is interfering with other children's participation and taking a lot of your time. His family has been under severe stress. Yours is the only early childhood service in the community. Do you take steps to have him withdrawn from your service?

The full potential impact of the code is yet to be achieved

These situations are complex and not easily resolved. The AECA Code of Ethics does not prescribe the correct answer to these dilemmas, for in fact there is no one right answer or solution, but rather better and worse ones. The Code of Ethics can, however, give guidance as we grapple with the complicated issues we face in our work. It reminds us of what is most important in our work with young children and their families, with our colleagues, in the community, and within our profession. While it outlines the breadth of our professional obligations and responsibilities, it reaffirms our primary and most fundamental commitment: the wellbeing of children.

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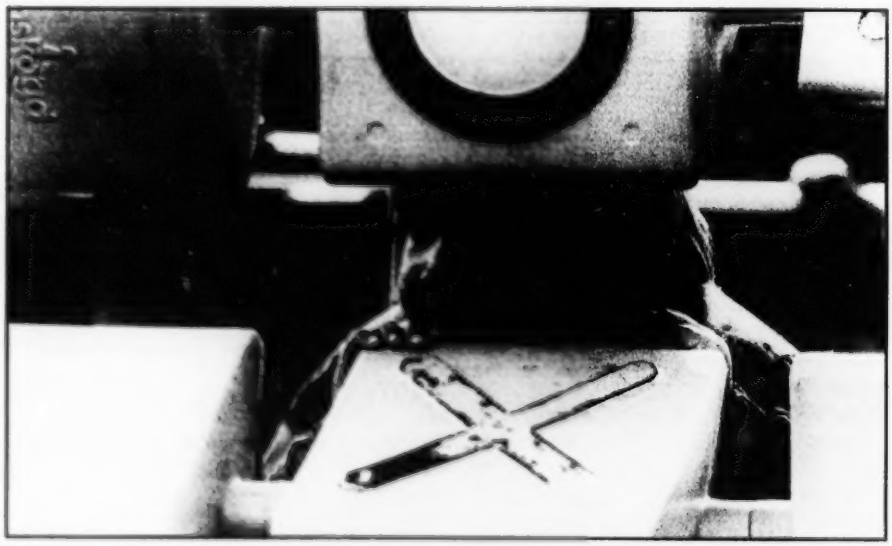
Australian Early Childhood Association Code of Ethics

The AECA Code of Ethics reminds us of what is most important in our work with young children and their families, with our colleagues, in the community, and within our profession

Preamble

A code of ethics is a set of statements about appropriate and expected behaviour of members of a professional group and, as such, reflects its values. The code that follows was developed by a National Working Party of the Australian Early Childhood Association, with considerable input from the field, and therefore is a code that is owned by the field, not imposed upon it. The Code has been developed to inform and guide the decisions and behaviour of all personnel involved both directly and indirectly in the provision of early childhood services for children between birth and eight years of age. Although oriented towards those who are in daily contact with children and their families, the Code is also intended as a guide for those who work in other capacities, for example, as tertiary educators, administrators, policy makers, and advisory staff. Their work impacts significantly on the ethical behaviour of early childhood practitioners.

Young children are especially vulnerable. They have little power over their lives and few skills with which to protect themselves. This places early childhood personnel in a relationship of special trust, one that is powerful, important, and easily violated. The vulnerability and powerlessness of young children and the recognition of the multifaceted dimensions of the role of early childhood personnel serves to highlight the special importance of a code of ethics. As early childhood personnel



undertake their work with and on behalf of young children and their families, they often face situations that involve a conflict of their responsibilities and professional values. A code of ethics is not intended to, and could not possibly, provide easy answers, formulae, or prescriptive solutions for the complex professional dilemmas they face in their work. It does provide a basis for critical reflection, a guide for professional behaviour, and some assistance with the resolution of ethical dilemmas.

Adherence to this Code necessarily involves a commitment to:

- Viewing the wellbeing of the individual child as having fundamental importance.
- Acknowledging the uniqueness of each person.
- Considering the needs of the child in the context of the family and culture, as the family has a major influence on the young child.
- Taking into account the critical impact of self-esteem on an individual's development.
- Basing practice on sound knowledge, research, and theories, while at the same time recognising the limitations and uncertainties of these.
- Working to fulfill the right of all children and their families to services of high quality.

I. In relation to CHILDREN, I will:

1. Acknowledge the uniqueness and potential of each child.
2. Recognise early childhood as a unique and valuable stage of life and accept that each phase within early childhood is important in its own right.
3. Honour the child's right to play, in acknowledgement of the major contribution play makes to development.
4. Enhance each child's strengths, competence, and self-esteem.

A code of ethics provides a basis for critical reflection, a guide for professional behaviour, and some assistance with the resolution of ethical dilemmas

In relation to children I will acknowledge the uniqueness and potential of each child

5. Ensure that my work with children is based on their interests and needs and lets them know they have a contribution to make.
6. Recognise that young children are vulnerable and use my influence and power in their best interests.
7. Create and maintain safe, healthy settings that enhance children's autonomy, initiative, and self-worth and respect their dignity.
8. Help children learn to interact effectively, and in so doing learn to balance their own rights, needs, and feelings with those of others.
9. Base my work with children on the best theoretical and practical knowledge about early childhood as well as on particular knowledge of each child's development.
10. Respect the special relationship between children and their families and incorporate this perspective in all my interactions with children.
11. Work to ensure that young children are not discriminated against on the basis of gender, age, race, religion, language, ability, culture, or national origin.
12. Acknowledge the worth of the cultural and linguistic diversity that children bring to the environment.
13. Engage only in practices that are respectful of and provide security for children and in no way degrade, endanger, exploit, intimidate, or harm them psychologically or physically.
14. Ensure that my practices reflect consideration of the child's perspective.

II. In relation to FAMILIES, I will:

1. Encourage families to share their knowledge of their child with me, and share my general knowledge of children with them, so that there is mutual growth and understanding in ways that benefit the child.
2. Strive to develop positive relationships with families that are based on mutual trust and open communication.

3. Engage in shared decision-making with families.
4. Acknowledge families' existing strengths and competence as a basis for supporting them in their task of nurturing their child.
5. Acknowledge the uniqueness of each family and the significance of its culture, customs, language, and beliefs.
6. Maintain confidentiality.
7. Respect the right of the family to privacy.
8. Consider situations from each family's perspective, especially if differences or tensions arise.
9. Assist each family to develop a sense of belonging to the services in which their child participates.
10. Acknowledge that each family is affected by the community context in which it operates.

III. In relation to COLLEAGUES, I will:

1. Support and assist colleagues in their professional development.
2. Work with my colleagues to maintain and improve the standard of service provided in my workplace.
3. Promote policies and working conditions that are non-discriminatory and that foster competence, wellbeing, and positive self-esteem.
4. Acknowledge and support the use of the personal and professional strengths which my colleagues bring to the workplace.
5. Work to build an atmosphere of trust, respect, and candour by:
   - encouraging openness and tolerance between colleagues
   - accepting their right to hold different points of view
   - using constructive methods of conflict resolution, and
   - maintaining appropriate confidentiality.
6. Acknowledge the worth of the cultural and linguistic diversity my colleagues bring to the workplace.
7. Encourage my colleagues to accept and adhere to this code.

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The AECA *Code of Ethics* Adopted in 1990

In relation to myself as a professional, I will: Be an advocate for young children, early childhood services, and my profession

IV. In relation to COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY, I will:

1. Provide programs which are responsive to community needs.
2. Support the development and implementation of laws and policies that promote the wellbeing of children and families and that are responsive to community needs.
3. Be familiar with and abide by laws and policies that relate to my work.
4. Work to change laws and policies that interfere with the wellbeing of children.
5. Promote cooperation among all agencies and professions working in the best interests of young children and families.
6. Promote children's best interests through community education and advocacy.

V. In relation to MYSELF AS A PROFESSIONAL, I will:

1. Continually update and improve my expertise and practice in the early childhood field through formal and informal professional development.
2. Engage in critical self-reflection and seek input from colleagues.
3. Communicate with and consider the views of my colleagues in the early childhood profession and other professions.
4. Support research to strengthen and expand the knowledge base of early childhood, and, where possible, initiate, contribute to, and facilitate such research.
5. Work within the limits of my professional role and avoid misrepresentation of my professional competence and qualifications.
6. Work to complement and support the child-rearing function of the family.
7. Be an advocate for young children, early childhood services, and my profession.

8. Recognise the particular importance of formal qualifications in early childhood studies, along with personal characteristics and experience, for those who work in the early childhood profession.
9. Act in the community in ways that enhance the standing of the profession.

Background information

Many people in the early childhood profession in Australia contributed to the development of the Code. This was considered to be very important if the Code was to be useful. The Code comes from the field and belongs to the field. A code of ethics imposed from the outside would not be as effective. If there is no sense of ownership of the Code by the people by whom and for whom it was developed, then it is of little value.

Similarly, there was a great concern from the beginning of the development of the Code that it be a living document, not simply another nice statement about what we do, a statement that is read once and filed away and forgotten. Hence, there has been considerable attention from the beginning of the development of the Code in 1988 to promote it, make it more visible, and encourage members of the profession to use it.

In other words, it is significant that we *have* a Code of Ethics, as most professions do, but of greater significance is the *use we make of it.*

The topic of professional ethics, including professional ethics in early childhood, is treated in some journals and books in a very academic and philosophical way. This is not inappropriate, because after all ethics is a branch of the discipline of philosophy. However, there is a risk that many early childhood personnel may see those treatments of professional ethics and think that ethics has nothing to do with them, that it has little relevance to the issues that concern them, the work-related matters that keep them awake at night.

The AECA Code of Ethics comes from the field and belongs to the field

It is important that the Code of Ethics is a living document for the early childhood profession, for people at all stages in their professional development. This booklet has been written to introduce people to the Code, to provide some basic information to assist in understanding what it is and what it is not, and how it can be of use in our work with or on behalf of children. To be meaningful, the Code must be used.

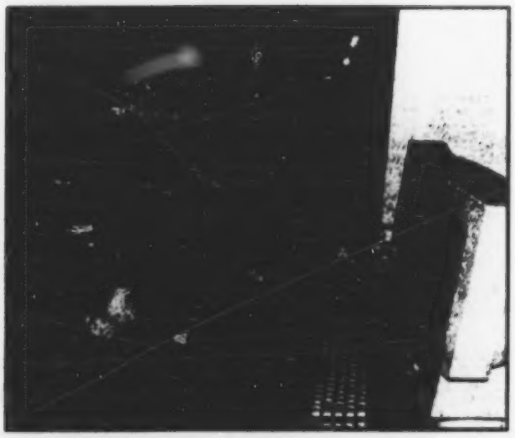
Core values: the basis for a code of ethics

It is important that the Code of Ethics is a living document . . . to be meaningful, it must be used

A code of ethics is a statement about practice, or what we will strive to do. It is based on core values, what is important in the work of early childhood professionals.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children produced a list of core values on which their code of ethics is based. These include values associated with the child, the family, the public, colleagues, and self. The NAEYC list follows:

- Recognition of each individual as a unique human being.
- Realisation of the full potential of children and adults.
- Environments that foster wellbeing and positive self-esteem in children, staff, and families.
- Autonomy and self-reliance in children, staff, and families.
- Appreciation of the special vulnerability of children and their need for safe and healthy environments.
- Recognition that each child is an individual with unique needs and abilities.
- Respect for confidentiality and the right of the child and family to privacy.
- Development of children: socially, emotionally, intellectually, and physically.
- Use of developmentally appropriate instructional techniques for children.
- Appreciation of childhood as a unique and valuable stage in the life cycle.
- Professional practice based on the best current knowledge of child growth and development



- Recognition and support for the interconnectedness of the child and family.
- Support for families in their task of nurturing children.
- Effective protection and advocacy for the rights of children.
- Support for the right of all children, regardless of income or other circumstances, to have access to quality early childhood programs.
- Unity among people who work in child care settings and cooperation with other professional groups concerned with the welfare of young children.
- Continuing growth as professionals.

The AECA Working Party added to this list the following:

- Appreciation of the diversity of cultures within our society and protection of the cultural identity of children in each minority group.
- Acknowledgement and use of the power of the media in the promotion of early childhood issues
- Rights of parents to pertinent information about their child.

The AECA Code of Ethics is based on these core values.

Why do we need one?

There are a number of reasons that a code of ethics is needed by the early childhood profession in Australia.

1. There are increasing demands made on early childhood workers by parents, funding bodies, management and sponsoring agencies, licensing and other regulatory authorities, accrediting agencies, and other groups and individuals. Sometimes these demands conflict with each other. Consequently, we may be pulled in different directions. The Code can help us to clarify what is most important.

There are increasing demands made on early childhood workers . . . The Code can help us to clarify what is most important

2. We are working increasingly with people from other disciplines and professions, who operate with different perspectives about the child from those held by members of the early childhood profession. In addition, we work with people with no formal qualifications. The priorities, beliefs about children, and practices of these people may conflict with ours. The Code can remind us of our core values, our basic beliefs, and the practices that are fundamental to our work.
3. Questions are often raised about the need for anything more than minimal qualifications, and indeed for formal qualifications of any kind, to work with young children. The perception held by some is that work with young children is no more than an extension of mothering, with the accompanying attitude that just about anyone can do it with their 'natural' abilities and a large dose of patience. The Code is a statement about the complexity of being an effective early childhood professional, and the skills and knowledge needed.

The Code can remind us of our core values, our basic beliefs, and the practices that are fundamental to our work

4. The quality of services is continually under threat. There are constant pressures on early childhood personnel in all roles to do more with less, to become more efficient. The Code helps to remind us of what is most important and cannot be compromised in providing services to young children.

5. In the general community there is a lack of understanding of what constitutes good early childhood practice, and consequently there are pressures to push children and to engage in inappropriate practices. The Code is a statement of what we believe is important, and can be used to educate the community.
6. Early childhood professionals in general appreciate the importance

of embracing diversity and respecting the views and requests of parents. This may require making compromises in practice, and the Code can assist us to set priorities.

7. Events outside the field of early childhood impinge on our work, and demand that members of the profession take a stand. For example, changes in the TAFE and university systems, industrial relations, and Commonwealth, State and local government policies and funding impact directly on the work of early childhood professionals. We have a responsibility to take a stand, which requires clarity about our position, where and how far we will compromise, what our professional 'bottom line' is. The Code can help us make those decisions.
8. There continues to be some divisiveness in our profession, based for example on issues about what service type one works in, the care-education debate, the privatisation of services, and overt encouragement of competition between services. In many cases these divisions are caused by lack of understanding and misconceptions about the nature of the work in different early childhood settings, and are fuelled by low status, lack of valuing, and imagined or real threats to working conditions. The Code states what is common to all who work in early childhood settings, and so should assist in bringing groups within the profession together.
9. The early childhood professional has always had many roles and diverse responsibilities: imparter of knowledge and information, adviser to parents, curriculum designer, developmental specialist, nurturer, assessor, to name a few. As the needs of families change, services and roles of people working in the profession will need to change also.

Who benefits from having a code?

- Early childhood professionals benefit from having a strong statement of standards and practice to guide them.
- Families and children who use early childhood services will benefit from the use of the Code, which embodies a statement of obligations and responsibilities. Young children are vulnerable, and adults who are responsible for them have substantial power and authority over them. Parents who use early childhood services should be very reassured by the existence and use of the Code.

Early childhood professionals will continue to have to take on new roles and responsibilities. No longer is it functional to think of the early childhood professional as someone who works exclusively with children. There has been an increasing trend over the past several years for early childhood professionals to work in managerial and administrative positions, where they have responsibility for substantial financial and human resources. Meeting the challenges of these positions requires skills and knowledge in addition to those gained in traditional early childhood courses, and presents new ethical dilemmas.

The way the Code is structured is itself an indication of the many roles played by early childhood professionals: in relation not only to children, but also to families, colleagues, the community, and the profession. The Code itself is a statement about what it means to be an early childhood professional.

10. The status of the early childhood profession is less than it should be. People within and outside the profession question the professional standing of early childhood workers—whether in fact early childhood is a profession. Having a code of ethics should raise status, as that is one standard indicator of being a profession.

11. Values differ across cultures. The Code and its underpinning core values will help the profession to identify and resolve value differences.

. . . the process of developing the Code was as important as the product that would result in the end

How was it developed?

The early childhood profession in Australia was interested in a code of ethics for a number of years before work began to develop one. In the late 1980s there was considerable interest in the code of ethics developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the peak early childhood organisation in the United States. That code, and the process used to develop it, served as a basis for the work in Australia.

The Australian code was developed over a two-year period and was approved by the Australian Early Childhood Association in September 1990. The work on the Code was guided and coordinated by a national working party established by AECA. From the beginning, it was believed that the process of developing the code was as important as the product that would result in the end. Consequently, one of the main aims from the beginning was to involve as many people as possible in the field throughout Australia in thinking about and contributing to the process of developing a code. To assist with this process, the AECA branch in each state and territory identified a contact person for the working party. These people agreed to undertake some work within their states to promote broad participation in the development of the code.

A resource kit was developed and distributed early in the process. It contained a comprehensive background paper, readings, workshop guides, resource materials, some strategies for getting people to think about ethics, and forms to facilitate information being fed back to the working party. These contact people were encouraged to offer professional development activities to encourage awareness and promote debate and discussion. This request was taken up enthusiastically. A number of activities took place around the country, ranging from large state-wide seminars and conferences to a series of workshops or small informal discussion groups with students and practitioners. The degree of interest in the topic was overwhelming.

The feedback was used as a basis for preparing the first draft of the Code. That draft was sent out with a feedback sheet, once again comments were requested, and these were used to prepare a second draft. The second draft was circulated for comment, and a final draft was prepared, and subsequently approved by AECA.

How is the Code relevant to early childhood practitioners?

It was asserted during the development of the code that only very experienced and mature early childhood professionals would see the Code as meaningful or of relevance to them. This view is based on the idea that

To whom does the Code apply?

The AECA Code of Ethics is for anyone who works with or on behalf of children 0–8 years old. This makes our Code different from many other professional codes, as usually a professional code of ethics applies in a formal way to a clearly defined and restricted group of people with a particular formal qualification, who are deemed formally to be members of that profession. While it is likely that people with formal early childhood/child care qualifications will be able to apply the Code with greater insight and understanding than those without, it is intended that anyone who works with and on behalf of young children would base their work on the Code. Important questions about the status of the early childhood professional have been dealt with extensively in the literature over the past several years. These include the question of whether early childhood is in fact a profession using the traditional definition, or in fact using any definition. Also, if it is a profession, then who can consider themselves as members? Some people view these as important issues, but in some ways they are marginal to the implementation of the Code, as it is an aspirational code, that is hoped will be embraced by all people who work with or on behalf of children. In other words, effective use of the Code does not rest on definitive answers to the question of whether or not early childhood is a profession, and if so, who are members.

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the concerns of experienced professionals have moved away from more concrete issues, and that they have reached a level of competence and confidence that frees them to be interested in broader issues such as ethics. However, the experience during the development of the Code and since that time suggests that professional ethics can be made meaningful to those just starting out in the profession, including students. Members of the working party were concerned initially about whether or not many practitioners would view the topic of ethics as worth struggling with. One could imagine busy child care workers, for instance, saying such things as 'I am so busy looking after kids that I don't have time to go to the toilet, and you want me to think about ethics!' However, an enthusiastic response came from all sectors. The issues addressed in developing and implementing a code of ethics seem to have struck a chord in the hearts and minds of early childhood professionals from varied backgrounds, with different types of qualifications, and working in different settings.

The Code contains the common principles that apply regardless of the setting in which we work, the particular ages of the children

The Code contains the common principles that apply regardless of the setting in which we work, the particular ages of the children, or in fact whether or not we work with children. It is what we aspire to in our work, something to be aimed for, achievable ideals.

Practices in our workplace can be looked at in the context of Code items, and—in particular when a conflict, problem, or dilemma arises—the Code can be referred to for guidance, although it will not supply answers or solutions. Work in the early childhood profession is far too complex for there to be answers that apply across the board or easy solutions. Some people expressed scepticism during the development of the Code and then great disappointment in the Code itself, in that the Code does not give answers or tell people what to do in difficult situations. This is an unreasonable and inappropriate expectation, in as much as the essence of being a professional is the exercising of judgement, the absence of formulae or universal 'right' answers that apply regardless of context. Professional practice is hardly ever simple.

How does a code of ethics differ from a policy statement, regulations, or other legal obligations?

Institutions, government departments, individual services, and sponsoring bodies for services have policies governing their operation. Children's services are subject to licensing, accrediting, and other regulatory requirements. Breaches of licensing and other legal requirements are punishable. Legal requirements are typically quite specific about what is allowed.

The AECA Code of Ethics, as has been stated previously, has come from the profession itself rather than being imposed from the outside. While it is desirable for those who are affected directly by policies to contribute to their development, this does not always occur. Compliance with legal requirements, and to some extent policy, is monitored from outside the group they apply to, while compliance with a code of ethics is monitored from within the group it applies to.

Legal obligations are essential minimum 'bottom line' obligations. Failure to meet those obligations leads to some sort of punishment, including exclusion from practice. The AECA Code of Ethics, on the other hand, focuses on desirable or optimal conduct, and is something to aim for. There would be considerable overlap in early childhood practice between what is legal and what is ethical, but it is possible for the two to conflict. That is, what is legal may not be what is ethical, and what is ethical may not be legal. This is further evidence of the complexity of ethical issues.

The Code of Ethics is written for individuals, not for services or other work settings, as legislation or policy would be. One of the challenges in developing the Code of Ethics was striking a balance between being general enough to cover all early childhood personnel without being so general that the Code items lose their meaning.

How will it be enforced?

Many codes of ethics in traditional professions are formally enforced, with members of the profession being formally registered, and with the possibility of deregistration if they are found to have breached the

The AECA Code of Ethics . . . focuses on desirable or optimal conduct, and is something to aim for

A view on enforcement

On the matter of implementation of the Code of Ethics, I feel that our Code is best described as a guideline to moral conduct within the field. I do not feel that AECA or any other group has the power to bind individuals to such conduct. I feel that AECA can provide the people who work within our field with some clear indicators of their moral duty toward children; this is the purpose of the Code. I would not want to see an enforcement policy in place for the moral conduct of early childhood professionals. To use the power of an external authority to impose standards of conduct on people seems to me to be the opposite of what we had originally intended. Thus, I would prefer to see the Code become a well-known and publicised statement which would guide the conduct of practitioners, policy-makers and others within the field of early childhood. As such, I feel the existence of the Code will assist people in seeing a unified purpose to their work and in making clearer decisions about difficult issues.

Barbara Piscitelli
Member of the AECA National Working Party

Code in a substantial manner. There are people within the early childhood profession who advocate movement toward formal enforcement of our Code. This is an extremely complex and controversial issue which requires further thought. The final recommendations of the working party did not include moving toward formal enforcement. The characteristic of inclusiveness—that is, acceptance and valuing of a range of levels of qualifications and of the worth and contribution of people with no formal qualifications—is symptomatic, some would say, of why early childhood does not fit easily into the standard definition of a profession, which is characterised typically by exclusiveness.

Is it fixed for all time—that is, will it change?

The content of the Code was thought through carefully at the time of its development. However, new knowledge, policies, and other developments impact on the work of early childhood professionals and therefore create a new context for a code of ethics. It is essential that the Code be looked at continually with a critical eye to ensure that it is relevant and comprehensive. There will need to be new items added, and possibly some items altered or deleted. Just as the development of the Code was a dynamic process, so should be the review of the Code. AECA put in place a number of mechanisms for ensuring that the Code is distributed widely and used. AECA has the responsibility to review and update the Code so that it remains relevant.

Conclusion

Familiarity and use of the AECA Code of Ethics by all early childhood professionals will benefit the profession and, more importantly, the children who are the focus of the work of the profession.

Reference

Piscitelli, B. (1990) personal communication.

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